

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O.H. 50

DON MITCHELL

Interviewed by

Patricia Young

May 20, 1980

FOUR STAR BOND

SOUTHWORTH COUS. A.

25% COTTON FIBER

INTERVIEWEE: DON MITCHELL

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 20 May 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

Y: This is an interview with Don Mitchell for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on Tuesday, May 20, 1980 at two o'clock in the afternoon at his home at Calhoun and 50th between Indio and Coachella at the Coachella Valley Fruit Company.

Let's begin this afternoon by talking about how you first came to the area and why you came.

M: I heard about the Coachella Valley through a friend of mine, Stuart B. McMillen who was a vegetable grower in the area what is now Shields Date Garden. He also had a small acreage of seedling date palms. His wife became an expert date packer. And the outlet for dates in those days was localized. Los Angeles, San Francisco, the West Coast, seemed to be almost the complete market area for what dates were grown in the year of 1923. May McMillen was a pioneer in the handling and packing of high-moisture

content dates. The trucking situation was far different in those days than it is now. There were very few trucks and most of the distribution was by American Railway Express. The special pickup of produce in the valley each day at the Indio freight depot was surprisingly large. I had never tasted a California date until I visited the McMillens. And I became quite interested. Stuart felt that there was a tremendous future in the date business, and he managed to pass some of that enthusiasm along to me. In the course of my visit of several days to Stuart and May McMillen³⁶, I met several of the important people of the area. One was C. E. Cook who was the spark plug that controlled and developed a little farmers co-op to handle dates that specialized in the Deglet Noor variety. This little co-op was called the Deglet Noor Date Growers Association⁴³, and it had a small packing house in the edge of Indio that has expanded over the years to the large setup that we now know as Tenacle^{meCO} West. I also met J. W. Newman who had a small bank on Thermal and who was also the head of the telephone company, the small locally-owned telephone company that was struggling to keep up with the growth of the valley. I was very much impressed with both of these gentlemen, and

later on as I came to the valley to live, they became strong personal friends. Mr. Cook quizzed me about my background. At that time I was living in Santa Paula, California, and was in charge of a small lemon-packing house called *THE TEAGUE MCKEINTOSH*, Mr. C. C. Teague who later was the outstanding citrus man of our state and who headed Sunkist had this small lemon-packing house as a family venture. Mr. Cook at the time didn't tell me his purpose in quizzing me about my background, but after I had returned to Santa Paula, I received a letter in which he asked me if I would be interested in putting in the fall and winter months in Indio. He had determined that my operations in Santa Paula were at a low ebb at that time. In the lemon industry spring and summer are the busy times of year, so there was no conflict between the most active period of the date industry and the lemon industry. On receiving Mr. Cook's letter, I talked it over with Mr. C. C. Teague and told him that I was keenly interested for more reasons than one. My wife at that time had a mild case of tuberculosis. The major remedy for that disease at that time was to move to the desert or a hot, dry place and wait for nature to make its cure. I was most interested in coming to Indio to see if that

would help perform a cure. Mr. Teague was a sincere friend of mine and he encouraged me to accept the offer of Mr. Cook to spend part of the year in the desert. So that was the major reason for my coming to the desert, although I had already become keenly interested in the date business. On September 1st, 1924, my wife and I and our little boy came to Indio and found a rentable house and started our contact with the date business and the people involved in it. I will mention a few of those who were keenly interested in the little packing and selling operation that had been inspired by C. E. Cook. One of the most enthusiastic date growers was Chester Sperry. He had a date garden in what is now North Indio. Unfortunately, most of his production was of varieties other than the Deglet Noor. Dr. W. R. Ferries was also one of the group that served as a board of directors. He had recently purchased a small date garden near the intersection of Avenue 50 and Calhoun Street that later became my home. On his death his family encouraged me to move to the place and operate the date garden, but the family lost interest and in due course of time I brought in some partners and over a long period of years formed a corporation and bought out the Ferries' interest. At

the present time the descendants of one of my partners at that time, Dr. D. C. Muck, who was my family doctor in Redlands, the descendants of Dr. D. C. Muck and my family share the ownership of Coachella Valley Fruit Company fifty-fifty. Another one of the early pioneers of Deglet Noor Date Growers Association was located in the oasis district. He had come from Alabama and had the typical southern accent that intrigued me. He served on the board of directors for a number of years, but he and his family have vanished except to the memories of his friends of those early days. When I arrived in Indio, Mr. Cook placed me in charge of the packing house thinking that my training in a lemon packing house would prepare me for that position. I found that practically everything was different and so I had a difficult, but challenging, job to do. Our first year our total tonnage was only a hundred and ninety-six thousand pounds of Deglet Noor dates. That sum would be less than what we now receive in an afternoon's delivery. But in those days it was considered quite a substantial crop. My first year I did install what I thought was an adequate system of handling the dates. It was mostly hand work and as the years went by it was obvious that we must reduce the cost of such a

high percentage of hand work. There was, however, no place that we could contact to order equipment. There just wasn't anyone that knew what was needed in the date business. It was brand new. One of my most valued co-workers was ^{Leonhardt Swingle,} ~~Leon Hart Swingle~~. He specialized on the part of the work that he knew best which was the grading, packing, processing of the fruit. Much of it was done by experimenting. There was no place that either Leonhardt ~~Hart~~ or Len as we called him or I could go to see an operating packing house. We were the first one here in Coachella Valley. I was very fortunate to have two men that had mechanical skill, Jack Walker and John Cothan. Over a period of years they built and perfected much of the equipment that we needed since the tonnage grew rapidly and the slow, expensive hand work that we used when I first arrived would just not handle increasing tonnage. So from time to time as our needs developed, Jack and John came up with adequate for the time equipment so that our costs of placing our food on the market were not excessive. As I look back, I feel that the Deglet Noor Date Growers Association was a fine thing for Indio. Our payroll grew as the crop grew until we had more than three hundred of the, mostly women, of the area helping

us prepare the date crop for marketing. At first most of our women that were graders and packers were the wives of railroad men or merchants or farmers of the area. But as time went on, the number available was not adequate. It was quite an event when we first installed a second shift. A few women of Mexican descent had been employed from time to time, but that first second shift was almost entirely of women and girls of Mexican descent. Later on there was no effort made to separate the races. The packing house became a social method, or social way, of introducing Anglos and Mexicans, and many strong friendships developed. My enthusiasm for the date business grew and grew. I didn't have sufficient funds to become a date grower, but I think Mr. C. E. Cook sensed my keen desire, and he helped me accomplish that goal. I borrowed several thousand dollars and put it with other funds that Mr. Cook supplied, and we purchased eighty acres in what is now inside the city limits of Palm Desert. Land was cheap in those days. If I remember correctly, we paid one hundred dollars an acre. It was necessary, however, to drill a well and employ capable men to install pipeline, which was done. My first planting was one acre. The offshoots that I purchased at that time cost twenty dollars each, so a

thousand dollars was all that I could invest to my first planting. I reserved ten acres of our first eighty for my personal planting. And as time went on, I finally managed to plant the whole ten. The rest of the first eighty acres was divided up into small sections of five- or ten-acre pieces and sold to those who wanted to gamble in this new industry. I don't remember any local purchasers, but about a dozen from all over the country bought five or ten acres that was planted by Cook-Mitchell and cared for. So in due course of time, the first eighty was in production, or at least started. We then purchased another eighty acres to the north of our first venture, a small part of which I still own in partnership with my sister. Surprisingly enough, that twenty-two acres produces the finest quality of dates in my operation and the largest volume per pound also. At the present time, I have an interest in six different plantings of dates, and in spite of a tremendous effort, none of the other plantings equals what we call M&R No. 1 that is now inside the city limits of Palm Desert. In due course of time, this beautiful date garden will probably be subdivided. There is now a subdivision adjoining, but it will be a little tweeze to my heart to see this type of progress which is inevitable

take place. As I look back, ⁴¹³ I have a feeling of deep respect for C. E. Cook. He was really the father of the date industry or at least one of the fathers. ⁴²¹ His wise and careful guidance laid the foundation for all of us who have followed in his path. His two sons were outstanding in the date business as well. The older son, William, many years after the passing of his father, also became a president and manager of the date packing house that his father started. The younger son, Robert Cook, contributed a lot to the date industry by being our scientist in residence. Many of the procedures that were used to process and prepare dates for market were the results of Bob's efforts, so the Cook family has contributed greatly to the date industry.

Y: Was Indian Wells and Palm Desert at that time pretty far away from the majority of the date gardens?

M: ⁴⁵⁸ I think that the pioneering of C. E. Cook was responsible for the growth of dates in that area. ⁴⁶² There were only a few, P. L. Day, H. L. Cavanagh, Clarice McGaw, Bob Webb, Frank Lawrence and others. There were probably a dozen growers all together. And the production from the area continued to grow. However, the towns of Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City and the whole area between

Palm Springs and Indio began to develop as a tourist center and many of these former date gardens have now been removed with the prospect that all will vanish in the due course of time.

Y: When you and Mr. Cook purchased property there in Palm Desert, the first and second eighty acres, who did you purchase it from, do you recall at all?

M: No, I don't because he did the buying and I was just a young fellow that he was taking under his arm. And, believe me, I've appreciated it so much. I did him some good because actually my background of packing house work, even though the lemon and the dates were so dissimilar, I was able to, see, I think the packing house had only been open a year or so before I came down. And costs were just out of line, but I did manage to get teamwork, get . . . I divided up the crew so that no one had a large number to supervise. We used four ladies and put maybe a dozen or twenty or so under each one. And I became keenly interested in the date business, and I have been all my life. Now to go back to, are you interested in continuing the story if it isn't tied in with Palm Desert?

Y: Oh, yes.

M: All right.

Y: May I ask you one thing though, you were talking about competitors and I just wanted . . . You said there were a lot of competitors to the Deglet Noor.

M: C. E. Cook was completely sold on the superiority of the Deglet Noor to the other variety of dates that were grown in the valley at that time. Some of these varieties have continued to the present day. The Khadrawy, the Halawy, are still in fair production, although the Deglet Noor has far surpassed it. The second variety is the Hidi is now being crowded by a fast-growing third called the Medjhool. I would expect that in due course of time the Medjhool will surpass the Zahidi, and become the number two date in our valley. After several years of alternating between lemons and dates, I found that more and more I was being converted to sales. I had two small children at this time, and the long periods away from home made me very unhappy. I finally turned in my resignation and recommended that Hildon Yall, a young man that I had trained in the packing-house procedures, be secured to take my place. He had worked for us in the dates for a number of years and had worked in lemons for Sunkist and had risen to the position of manager of a medium-sized lemon house in Ventura County. So he had an excellent background to carry on. My home was on the former Ferries

ranch that became known as Coachella Valley Fruit Company. And it has been growing and producing a full volume of fruit all of my recent years. At the present time I personally have an interest in four other places in addition to Coachella Valley Fruit Company, and I'm delighted as I have passed the retirement age to have my son and daughter carry on for me. They, fortunately for me, are interested in continuing. It would have been a serious blow to me if I had been forced to sell to strangers. A beautiful big date palm I've always felt was my friend. I've been proud to be a date grower. I'm also proud of the organization that was developed while I was active. At the present time it is known as Tenac^o~~le~~ West, and we have one of our huge conglomerates in charge of selling. Looking back over the years, the most difficult problem we had was selling at a price that would permit us to make a profit. My early selling trips were difficult. Foreign dates brought in from the date-growing regions of the old world sold at a very low price and to convince the buyers of chain stores or supermarkets that our dates were something different and better that deserved a higher price was not an easy game. This has been done, however. The production of Coachella Valley is now well distributed

over the country.

Y: Let's talk about, I mentioned William Paul, W. Paul, and you said that he belonged to a different organization.

M: Yes. Well, let me get my thoughts together a bit.

Y: Okay.

M: Let's see, there was the Caste family. Have you heard of them? There were other packers of dates in the Coachella Valley. The ones that I remember the best was C. E. Caste and his wife who operated an establishment near Mecca. They did not specialize in one variety as the Deglet Noor Date Growers Association did. But Mrs. Caste was an exceptionally talented packer of fancy boxes of dates. Her fame spread around the country. Another grower, W. L. Paul, was interested in Deglets, as well as other varieties, and imported offshoots from the old world to help the industry get started. A vigorous group that established their own packing house and maintain one to this day was pioneered by . . . I'll start in again then. Another of our packers and producers that have made an excellent name for themselves is the Anderson family. Lee and his wife have established a name for their own products and their children are carrying on in an excellent way. Well, that's enough for that one. I'll tell you what I think I better do . . .

The date industry expanded so that the total tonnage was between twenty and thirty million pounds annually. The Deglet Noor variety has always been the largest in tonnage, with the Zahidi a fairly close second. The dozen or so minor varieties were mainly centered in the gift-buy packages sold by the many date shops in various parts of our valley or sent to the gift shops of the fruit and raisable nature around the country. We have been fortunate to have a strong market for dates at Christmastime. We have also been fortunate to have dates as a leading product for health food stores, those organizations that are concerned in diet since they have made our product one of their favorite articles for sale. In recent years much of the lower grades that are left over after top quality has put into fancy packages has been pitted and made into products useful to the big cereal makers or companies that manufacture fruitcake and specialties in which dates would be appropriate. About a third of the Deglet Noors of our industry now go into what we call products. This is fortunate for us and for our customers, too. Some of the small dates or scarred dates or crippled dates would not be effective on the market as they are, but pitted and made into a whole series of products, they

fill a need. This is a strong selling part of the date industry. Lower grades are all used. And while the returns are not as high as the so-called top quality, it helps strengthen the industry so that at the present time it's a sound and progressive agricultural undertaking. Many years in the transition from my early days to the present date growers were barely able to meet expenses. The major drawback was sales and getting an adequate price for our product. Now Coachella Valley grown dates are known in nearly all parts of our country. I have a feeling that the future for our industry is safe and substantial unless at some future time we overproduce. I sincerely hope this does not fall. Okay.

Y: I have some questions for you. You mentioned earlier that some of your best dates were in the cove area, in the Palm Desert area. Is there a difference in the climate ^{or} of the soil there that makes it better?

M: The fact that the twenty-two acres that I have in the cove area has been outstanding in both quality and quantity has puzzled me over the years. One thing I know contributed to the quality out there is the fact that the well that we have on that place contains considerable nitrogen. This makes it unfit to drink, but the palms don't seem to

mind. However, if it was a case of nitrogen only that made the difference, I should say it is not the case nitrogen only, I mean the difference, because in various plantings in the lower valley we have used a great variety of nitrogen applications trying to equal what we found in the cove area. And no matter how hard we tried, we could never duplicate it. So it will remain an unsolved mystery, I'm afraid.

Y: I've been told that there are a lot of, or have been, and this may be the forties on absentee ranchers in Indian Wells-Palm Desert area.

M: Oh, the whole valley. One particular characteristic of the date industry is the high percentage of absentee owners that have been involved. I've never seen an actual count of how many date gardens are operated by a resident owner and how many are managed by a hired foreman or by the packing organizations that are taking care of the properties for absentee owners. I would imagine that less than half of date gardens are operated by owners or partial owners, which is rather a remarkable situation.

Y: Do you remember many of those absentee owners being around when you and Mr. Cook were developing?

M: My experience with absentee owners has been quite extensive.

I've been involved with a lot of them. Very few are frequent visitors. Very few make any attempt to operate from long distance. It's an unusual situation. I've heard of no other crop that has quite the same problem.

Y: Is it a tax writeoff for them because you said dates weren't producing?

M: Well, the tax write-off angle I doubt had much to do with it. I feel that, in my personal case, I don't have the money to bring a date garden to production. So I contacted outsiders that did. And in most cases the ventures were successful in the end although we had years when we were in red ink. One characteristic of our date industry that is peculiar to the date business is the market for date offshoots. My son and I have shipped date offshoots all over the world, wherever the climate is suitable for the growing of dates. Ordinarily a Deglet Noor palm will make from five to ten offshoots in its early years. By the time they're ten or twelve years old it's through with making date children to follow in their path. But for example, the sale of offshoots to others who are planning to develop date gardens has been a lifesaver financially to those who are not amply supplied with money to produce a date garden. I am really curious as to how

many I have sent all over the world in recent years with the aid of my son David. But a total would be many thousands of offshoots.

Y: You were saying earlier that perhaps some of the reasons why there aren't so many date gardens now in the cove area is that that land is being used for residential purposes.

M: Yes.

Y: I have heard that that's taken place simply because we had a slump in the date industry and now it's picked up again and therefore ranchers let their date gardens go simply because they could not afford to keep them up. Having property now under cultivate in the cove area, did you find that true?

M: My feeling is that this particular garden that I still have in the Palm Desert area I doubt if it has ever been in the red. It's been a moneymaker from the very first. In fact, it supplied the cash that I used to develop other places down here. But these here, no matter how hard I tried, would never quite equal in quantity and quality of what that one was.

Y: Is that true of other

M: Oh, yes, in general. In general the Palm Desert area has

been superior to the lower valley, but I don't know how, I've never checked with others there. I know that Bert Cavanagh used to be a heavy producer of good-quality dates. He was out there, he knew every palm by their first name. (laughter) And now he is developing another garden down here in the valley now after selling one that he brought to production at a real good price. And he is making a good record here, but I question if it would quite equal that one out there. But part of it is good care. There's no question about it. But I don't believe that even Bert Cavanagh, and he's one of the best, can duplicate down here what he did out there. Anyway, it's an interesting characteristic. I don't know when the date business will disappear out there, but it's going to in the course of time.

Y: The size of the trees, do they get too tall for production? Is that part of the problem?

M: No. I think it's just more expensive. The taller they get, the more expensive it is, but we have trees here that they're over sixty feet tall. And we have a crane that has a boom of eighty feet long so we've got a few more years to go before we reach the end of our capacity. But we could probably go on for another interval by getting

a bigger boom on our crane. But we feel that where we are here, we're between Indio and Coachella, and ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years at the most, this will all be city. I saw in the paper the other day the prediction that Indio in the year 2000 will have a hundred and twelve thousand people. If so, why we'll be right in the middle of town because it's . . . the area needed to supply a city of a hundred and twelve thousand would include us.

Y: Where do you think the date industry will move to?

M: Down toward the Salton Sea. We have made our first move in that direction. There was one planting near the Valerie Jean Date Shop. We have forty acres now that are ten years old, and another thirty acres that is two years old. And the trend, I think, will be in that direction. Anyone visiting the lower end of the valley will notice a number of one, two and three year old date gardens that are the future producers for the industry. I feel that the date industry is sound and good now, particularly since we have an efficient selling agency. Our bad years were all behind us when Tentacle¹ came in. Our little farmers co-operative don't have the leverage that the big boys have. Tentacle¹ also is a tremendous marketer of raisins and almonds and other agricultural

products. The salesmen for Tentacle⁰ can go to the head office of a chain store and walk out with a hundred thousand dollar order. Our old farmer co-operative never had a chance.

Y: I've seen a lot of picking going on where the entire bunch of dates now seems to be picked rather than the dates being individually picked. Is that influencing quality, or how long has that been going on?

M: In the old days where we picked seven or eight times just as the dates ripened, our costs were high. We had to get a less expensive way of handling fruit. The Deglet Noor variety is considered a semi-dry date so that we can let the bunches mature on the tree and dry down. Then cut the bunch, ^{it to} lower /equipment on the ground, vibrate the dates off in the bins, and instead of picking dates one by one, we pick them bunch by bunch now. When they get to the packing house, they are firm as little blocks of wood. But a system of returning the proper moisture content to the date, something that Len Swendlow was experimenting with back in the early days. Now it's been developed to an efficient system and we can put, say, twenty percent or whatever is the proper amount of moisture, we can develop a nice tasty date from the hard

little block of wood that has another advantage, too, because these hard dry dates you can keep in storage from one year to the next if you want to with no deterioration. Whereas, if there were big and plump and juicy, their lifetime is short. Anyway, that's one reason why the Deglet Noor variety is number one. And the Zahidi, which is very similar in moisture content. Those two varieties are adaptable to mass production, whereas a high-moisture date is always a risk. Now the Medjhoool variety that has been reduced in recent years but is growing rapidly in popularity will have to be handled differently because it is not as dry as the Deglet or the Zahidi, and doesn't lend itself as well to the process of hydration which is the name for restoring the proper amount of moisture to your date once it has been dried out. But the Medjhoool has other characteristics, the good flavor, good appearance, good production, so that I am expecting that a lot of attention and study will be given to a more efficient way of handling the Medjhoool than we have today. Ten years from now I imagine that we'll be doing something very different with that variety than we are now.

Y: Do you think that will encourage some of the other minor

dates which are . . .

M: It might, but I don't see any new plantings of the minor varieties beyond just replacement planting because more and more hand labor is expensive. As time goes on the costs go up seriously, so even though some of these minor varieties are delicious, they're a real treat, I doubt if there will be the expansion that we can predict for the Deglets and Zahidis. It's quite interesting to note that just yesterday I had a visitor from South Africa. He says there is an area there that has very similar weather to what we have here. He was trying to buy offshoots, but we had sold all that we had for this year. And he is planning to have shipments made next year, and the only variety that he talks about is the Deglet Noor. Now in Israel they have similar weather conditions and soil conditions, and they have been buying offshoots in this valley for, oh, I'd say almost twenty years, so they have an acreage that is not far below ours. But they don't want to sell offshoots. I suggested to this South Africa man that they go to Israel and buy shoots. I guess they found out that the Israelis don't want to sell.

Y: Because they're using their own, you mean?

M: Yes, they're planting them themselves. So in due course

of time that little country of Israel that has some very rich soil, the Jordan Valley and some of those other areas, are, well, for instance, I talked to their agent that was here last week and he says that they grow persimmons in a big way over there and make gift boxes of persimmons and ship them all over Europe. So dates would be another product for them. And they need incoming cash, well, everybody does for that matter, but they must have something to sell. And that's why they are coming here and buying thousands of offshoots.

Y: Only Daglet Noor?

M: Oh, no. They are using the Zahidi and Medjhool also, but the Deglets are by far the largest variety that they have purchased.

Y: Going back to something you said earlier, you were talking about the time when, I just wanted to get it straight, when you were both with the lemon-packing plant and also here. You resigned from your job at the packing plant after quite awhile?

M: Well, after quite a long time, but I don't know that wants to go in.

Y: Oh, yes. Go ahead. Fine.

M: But I just didn't want to be put onto sales and be away

from home so much.

Y: Oh, there. You were living here.

M: I was living here then, by that time. At that time I was here.

Y: Okay, I just didn't . . .

M: But my kids and my wife mean an awful lot to me, and I, if I had been kept as manager of the plant, which was my trade, I think I would have stayed. But they needed a salesman that understood the date business so badly that I was given one sales trip after another and I'm a family man. I just don't like being away from my (laughter) so by that time this was, you see, when I first came here, there was maybe twenty acres here that was in production. Well, we bought the forty across the street and so on. And, well, this road right down here is the middle and this is the oldest stuff. You see those big trees over there, how tall they are.

Y: Yes.

M: But that was just bare land out there between us and the highway. And the forty beyond was bare land, and so I wanted to bring it into production and I wanted to be here. I had no farm experience. My dad had a restaurant, and I worked for dad for many years and I would go down and open

up in the morning for him so that he could get a little extra sleep. But I wasn't a salesman. I wasn't a farmer. But I got into the date business, and I had to be both. And take it all and all, though, it was a fortunate thing for me. When I went to college, I was red hot to be a college prof or a high school prof, and I specialized in botany and things of that type.

Y: Specialized in what?

M: Botany and, oh you know, the whole family of similar subjects. I was going to teach in that field. And I never got a chance. When I was a senior, just starting my senior year at college, it was World War I. And everybody in school who was old enough was forced to register. My number was drawn in the first five percent of World War I, so I was into the Army. But I had been trying to . . . you know, you weren't around in World War I. The fliers got all the publicity and, well, World War I was won by the fliers. And in my junior year I went over to Coronado to see if I could get in as a flier and they gave me the brushoff and said to go to San Francisco and take a physical examination at ~~LETTERMEN~~ Hospital and then we'll see what we can do with you.

Y: Where were you from, Los Angeles?

M: No, Redlands University. I was a student up here at Redlands.

Y: Where had you been living?

M: Well, my parents lived in San Luis Obispo.

Y: Oh.

M: But I came from San Luis Obispo to Redlands, and in my junior year the war was on and I got red hot to be a flier. And I went down to Coronado and they really gave me a brushoff.

And I served as a trustee of the Coachella Valley High School. And Gale Brumwell was the man in charge at that time, and he's an old friend of mine, fraternity brother, and he had the idea that this valley needed a junior college. And I well remember the time when two men from Sacramento who came here at Gale Brumwell's invitation, met with us here at the high school. And we went into the preliminaries of establishing a college here in the Coachella Valley. We also met with the board of Palm Springs High School. There were only the two high schools at that time. And more than any other one person, Gale Brumwell fathered the establishment of the College of the Desert. But in due course of time an office was one of the store buildings in Palm Desert was rented as an

office. An election was held and I had resigned out there at the high school and I was elected as the board member on the new college. And little by little we put together a school. A thousand and one difficulties came up. Oh, my golly, everything that could go wrong did just about, but we made it. Who was our first president out there?

Y: Roy McCall.

M: That's right. That's right. By the way I got a letter from Roy McCall not long ago. Did you know him or anything?

Y: I interviewed him.

M: Oh, you have. Have you met his wife?

Y: Yes.

M: Oh, boy. What a sad thing. She has been in big trouble for years and years and years, and he has just devoted his life to her. If anybody deserves a free ticket to heaven it's Roy McCall because that wife of his, I don't know what the name of her trouble is but it's been, must be at least ten years.

Y: Yes, I was going to say that.

M: Yes.

Y: Did you know him at University of Redlands?

M: Sure. He's another fraternity brother. (laughter) Anyway, good old campus sayings, you know. We got along beautifully

with each other. Anyway, those first years were really rough. Did Roy tell you or not?

Y: Some of it, yes.

M: But bless his old heart, he picked a good crew. We had excellent luck with our faculty members, and believe me, that's a big part of it. And, say, that's the worst I've seen it for you, Penny. You've never had it that bad before, have you?

P: We didn't come in to interrupt you, Don.

M: Anyway, I served for, oh, I guess, six years as president of the board and then I just insisted on getting off because I wanted somebody else to have a shot at it. And but the reward I got was to have a library named after me. Did you notice that? So that's my claim to fame. That beautiful building is named Don Mitchell Library because of my serving, how many years was I on the board all together? I think it was about ten or something like that. And I really, we had a difficult choice when Roy had to leave because of the necessity of taking care of ✓Elma. We . . . I remember the tremendous problem we had to get another Roy McCall. You just don't find them. And so we went about it this way. We had a committee of, well, the president of Redlands and president of this,

that and the other. There was several experienced presidents. They came to Palm Desert. They spent a whole day. We had a stack of applications. It was milled around that the vacancy was there and we had applications from every place. Darn good ones, too. It wasn't just the little getting started. It was some excellent applications. And so we turned it over to that committee, and they made a, they whittled it down to, I think there was four, and then we interviewed them. And we hired the present man.

: Dr. Stout.

M: Yes. That was one of the most difficult decisions I've ever made in my life, and I think the rest of us.

Y: So it was actually the board of trustees that made the final decision.

M: Sure, it was up to us; it was our job to do that. And . . .

Y: Did Dr. McCall actually help out in that decision-making process?

M: He wasn't there. Let's see . . . Come to think about it, I believe he did sit in with us a time or more.

Y: Who was on that original board of trustees?

M: Pardon?

Y: Who was on that original board?

M: Oh, Ray ^{Rummonds} ~~Robins~~ was one. This little lady over at Palm Springs.

Y: Oh, Staley.

M: Staley, yes. And ^{A... who WERE they PENNY} ?

Y: I asked you your favorite question, didn't I? Names.

M: Well, yes.

Y: I can find it somewhere else. There's no problem. I just thought if you knew.

M: Yes. But Staley was one.

Y: I have it written down. Don't worry about it.

M: Anyway, that was an excellent board. We really worked at our job and it was a . . .

P: You're going to talk this gal silly today.

M: Well, she can always turn it off any time she wants. Anyway, I thoroughly enjoyed . . . There was one big disappointment to me about that school. Gale Brumwell resigned out here. He came out as our business manager. I would have liked to have seen him our first president, but it didn't work out that way. But he had a period of sickness right at the time when there was a thousand things going on. And so he resigned and we filled his place, but if Gale Brumwell had stayed on as manager or been president, I think a lot of the grief and trouble we

had would have been . . . we wouldn't have had it.

Y: Grief and trouble, what do you mean?

M: Oh, a thousand things that went . . . for instance, finding our location. We had a little boy there that was battling us all the time.

Y: Frank Gogerty?

M: Yes, yes. Where did you get a story about him?

Y: Oh, from him.

M: From Gogerty?

Y: Absolutely. He has no bones to pick about that situation.

M: Is that right?

Y: Oh, he'd smell it out.

M: Well, for goodness sakes! But that old guy was fighting us tooth and nail. What a guy!

Y: Can you elaborate on that whole process of picking a site?

M: No, but that was . . . we picked the site that we did which is right close to his ranch, but we didn't do it because we love old Gogerty. We thought it was an ideal place. And I think time has proved that it was an ideal place.

Y: Dr. McCall had mentioned that the first site was the Indian Wells site that you liked.

M: Yes. But the present site was well thought of and it's turned out good. But that old guy, doggone him. I remember the people of Cathedral City wanted to have a site over there in their area, and we had an evening meeting and Gogerty and two or three of his pals were there. Roy McCall and some of our board were there. And we had a battle just back and forth, but one thing that turned the tide in our favor, we had a little recorder and every time old Gogerty or his bunch would get up to make a speech, we'd go turn it on ostentatiously. If it hadn't been there, they would have gone after us with half truths and untruths and all sorts of propaganda. They would have made a story that would have impressed the people of Cathedral City because the room was full of people. But when they knew that what they said was going to be recorder, it cramped their style and it was just before an election. And Cathedral City voted in our favor beautifully, thanks to a little old box. Anyway, that school is dear to my heart even though I never was a student because I remember we opened our first classes while the carpenters were banging and everything was in a commotion. But those first classes there, by golly, must have had an awful time. We had three in our first

graduating class. ~~That first year~~ there were some that had had college work in other places, so they got enough to graduate. And that first class, I often wonder what's become of them because they had a unique situation there. But my years, eight years I think, on the high school board here, it was with someone else the first year, but we got Gale the second year come over from Elsinore. And I have a high regard for him. He's a real brainy man. And if he hadn't gotten sick there and resigned, if he had continued his position with the colleges, either as business manager or, I would have wanted to see him president, I don't know whether I could have made that happen or not.

Y: You mean instead of Roy McCall.

M: Yes. Because, but even before McCall was chosen, Gale had quit because he had, there was a thousand things that needed his attention, and he was our only man. We didn't have anybody else on the payroll except one man and he had to do everything and it broke him clear down. That chapter. Now, anything else?

Y: (laughter) I want to ask you one thing. Where in Palm Desert was your second eighty acres that you purchased?

M: Oh, right north of our, you know where the first one was,

don't you?

Y: Well, explain for the tape where the first one was.

M: Well, it's all subdivided now and so on. But you know where Deep Canyon Drive is?

Y: Yes.

M: Well, it was between 111 and 44 and Deep Canyon Drive.

And the next eighty was due north, just . . . Deep Canyon was not cut through then. It was just a, there was a, I think it was a dirt road, it just wasn't, between the two streets.

Y: So you went from Deep Canyon, how far east?

M: Well, let's see, it would be . . .

Y: To the McGaw Ranch?

M: Yes. Yes, the McGaw Ranch was the next one.

Y: So you owned the property across from the Catholic Church at this point. Is that right?

M: Yes.

Y: Good. I took some photographs of some of the Cal Date people out there, picking dates.

M: Yes, fair enough. There was a tiny little home town bank in Thermal. You see, at one time at the beginning, Thermal was the biggest town in the valley. And Newman started that, I don't know whether he started it or not, but he

was the key man of that bank in 1923, when I first came down. And the little farmer's telephone company was awfully crude in those days because they didn't have any money to do it right. So, and the valley began to fill up with people faster than they could fill up the pocketbook. And everybody was griping about the phone service, about how lousy service and all that sort of thing. But I, knowing the inside of it a little bit, I thought they really did miracles because the old boy had a little money but you needed big money. You're stringing wires all over an area as large as this valley and buying equipment and things of that kind. His daughter Eva is here now. I don't know, if you're interviewing somebody for past history, she has a far better memory than mine and she does, well, in those early days she was right in the middle of it. Newman had two children, a son that he went into the telephone company, and then when they finally sold out, the son went to the bigger company and was given a high-up job and that was part of the deal. But Eva Huntsaker would be a most interesting person to interview.

Y: Does she also have any of the old directories or anything from the phone company?

M: I imagine she does or she knows where to get them. I believe that if anyone has the story, she does. Her father had the Newman Ranch, which is on the slope up above Thermal and Eva still has it. She lives there now. And she must be sixty-five or so or about that age, I guess. But she, I see her, she still comes to Thermal Church where I go and if you like, I can try to make an appointment for you if you want to do it.

Y: Great!

M: You don't have a car, do you?